

Words as Weapons: Using Literary Theory to Unpack *The Hate U Give*

The recent deaths of unarmed black boys and men, many at the hands of law enforcement officials – Freddie Gray in Baltimore, MD; Tamir Rice in Cleveland, OH; Michael Brown in Ferguson, MO; Eric Garner, in New York City, NY; and Trayvon Martin in Sanford, FL, to name a few – have brought national attention to an issue many Americans already knew to be true: African-Americans are disproportionately subjected to violence at the hands of the very people entrusted to protect them. According to data collected by the *Washington Post*, black Americans are 2.5 times as likely as white Americans to be shot and killed by a police officer, while *unarmed* black Americans are five times as likely to be shot and killed (Lowery, 2016). Many of the police officers involved in these incidents are placed on leave and/or reassigned, but rarely are they fired from their positions or held criminally liable (Park & Lee, 2017). A number of solutions for ending violence against black Americans have been proposed – increased accountability, improved police training, acknowledgement of bias and prejudice – but none quite as provocative as the one proposed by English Language Arts (ELA) teachers Cridland-Hughes and King who argue that “the *idea* of violence against non-white bodies begins in the classroom” (as cited in Johnson, et al., 2017, p. 61). Colleagues Johnson et al. (2017) concur, writing that “symbolic violence is the cornerstone of the physical violence [plaguing] US society. Black youth are spiritually murdered in classrooms” by educators who shoot metaphorical bullets - rejecting, silencing, and disrespecting the lived experiences, culture, and humanity of black students (p. 61). ELA classrooms, they urge, must become revolutionary sites for racial justice, and teachers must start “loving blackness to death” by incorporating black literacies and texts into the curriculum. Indeed, these teachers are not alone. American author and activist Ta-Nehisi

Coates (2015) argued the same point in *Between the World and Me*, a letter to his adolescent son, writing that “the larger culture’s erasure of black beauty [is] intimately connected to the destruction of black bodies.” The way forward, he argues, is to write “a new story, a new history, told through the lens of our struggle.”

Fortunately, the explosion of young adult literature has given English Language teachers opportunities for incorporating new stories and new histories into their classrooms. These texts highlight themes of interest to young adults in today’s world, mirror the language used by young adults in their everyday lives, incorporate new kinds of literacies, and make young adults the protagonists of their stories. Importantly, many protagonists are the very characters marginalized or silenced in the traditional canon: individuals with disabilities; gay, lesbian, and transgender communities; women; immigrant populations; and people of color. Indeed, Johnson et al. (2017) draw attention to the narrow depiction of black characters in the traditional canon, as either subordinate, inferior, or unreal. While black characters are still underrepresented in young adult literature – they accounted for just 22% of characters in children’s books in 2016 (Donnella, 2017) – young black readers are more likely to see their lives mirrored in the pages of the books they read than they were in the past, in titles like *All-American Boys* by Jason Reynolds, *The Crossover* by Kwame Alexander, *Brown Girl Dreaming* by Jacqueline Woodson, and *Finding My Place* by Traci L. Jones, to name just a few. But it is arguably Angie Thomas’s *The Hate U Give* that has the most potential to respond to Johnson et al.’s (2017) plea to transform the classroom from a space perpetuating violence against black youth to a revolutionary cite of racial justice. Indeed, by telling the story of Starr Carter, who bears witness to both the murder of her friend Khalil at the hands of Chicago city police and the subsequent unwillingness of the district attorney to prosecute, Thomas illustrates the central premise and title of the book, borrowed from

rapper Tupac Shakur – that the hate you give black children ultimately turns back on itself. Or, in the words of Khalil to Starr, “What society gives us as youth, it bites them in the ass when we wild out” (p. 17). Thus, by introducing this text in the classroom – that is, by loving blackness to death rather than giving hate - teachers shield students from the metaphorical bullets and very possibly, the real ones as well.

Giving students texts that validate their lived experience, culture, and language is important, but giving them the tools to analyze those same texts is equally important. Teaching students to examine young adult literature through the lens of literary theory, for example, gives them the opportunity to understand a story from multiple perspectives, to test their own assumptions, in short, to develop their critical thinking skills. Students often shy away from theory – teachers too, if we’re honest with ourselves – in large part because theory feels threatening. As Milner, Milner, and Mitchell (2012) write, students often wrongly conclude that “only the wise, learned or especially gifted” can rightly determine the criteria by which literature should be understood and judged (p. 154). Indeed, some of this anxiety is understandable, given the prominence of New Critical Formalism in the 20th century, a literary theory that promoted the idea of one “correct” reading of a text. But Moore (1997) offers an antidote, defining theory as “any kind of sustained reflection” of a text, thereby making all of us theorists to one extent or another. In addition, literary theories have expanded in recent years, largely in reaction to the rigidity of Formalism. Because of the plurality of perspectives now offered – Feminism, Deconstructionism, Black Aesthetics, and Reader-Response, for example - Milner, Milner and Mitchell (2012) view theory as a way to “guard against single-minded authority” and the imposition of truth from the outside. Indeed, some of these theoretical tools may facilitate students’ understanding of books like *The Hate U Give*, and expedite the transformation of the

classroom to a radical site of racial justice. Some might argue theory is *necessary* for such a transformation to take place.

Despite the advantages of introducing literary theory into the classroom, it should nevertheless be done cautiously (Milner, Milner, & Mitchell, 2012). Students need to be at the appropriate stage of cognitive development – that is, they need to have progressed from concrete stages of thinking to more abstract ones – and they need to be confident in their own responses to the books they’re reading. Assuming both prerequisites are met, Moore (1997) suggests introducing theory as an “intellectual adventure” that invites students to answer these five questions:

- 1) How does the theory define the literary qualities of the text?
- 2) What relation does the theory propose between the text and the author?
- 3) What role does the theory ascribe to the reader?
- 4) How does the theory view the relationship between text and reality?
- 5) What status does the theory give to the medium of the text, language?

Moore (1997) supplements these questions by referencing M.H. Abrams’ theoretical map, a triangle with the text itself in the center, the three sides represented as the larger world, the artist, and the audience, and arrows connecting each of the four components. As readers develop, Abrams argues, they shift their focus from one component to another. “In adolescence, we begin to investigate the world in the text, and we construct that world from our perspective as *readers*. As we become more sophisticated readers, we move beyond the world and ourselves to focus on the *author* who created the text...and we finally engaged the language of the *text* specifically” (Moore, p. 11). Because different theories emphasize different components (and/or provide different answers to the five questions posed by Moore) – e.g. Reader-Response privileges the

reader while Formalism privileges the text – some are more developmentally appropriate than others. *The Hate U Give* is typically recommended for students fourteen years and older, largely because of the subject matter it addresses (e.g. race, police brutality, interracial dating, activism). As a result, readers are likely developmentally able to examine it from almost any theoretical lens. As we'll see, however, Reader-Response provides one of the most powerful windows into the text, while Black literary theory and Feminist theory provide nuance and complexity. Buckle up; our intellectual adventure is about to begin.

Because one of the fundamental responsibilities of English Language teachers is to help develop the habit of lifelong reading in their students – more ambitiously yet, the lifelong *love* of reading – instruction has shifted from a knowledge-based approach to a response-centered approach, or, one in which the primary aim is to help students develop *personally meaningful* connections to the texts read in class, both self-selected and assigned. Thus, reader-response theory, as the name suggests, privileges the reader above all else, above text, author, and the text's relationship to the larger world. As Probst (1988) describes, "Literature is experience, not information, and the student must be invited to participate in it, not simply observe it from the outside. The student is very important – not simply as a recipient of information," but as a meaning-maker (as cited in Bushman & Haas, 2006, p. 56). According to Milner, Milner, and Mitchell (2012), reader-response theorists ascribe to the following principals: readers create meaning, as opposed to simply discovering it in the text; the text has no meaning independent of the meaning created by the readers acting upon it; and the factors that influence how a reader creates meaning are *specific* to that reader – his or her past experiences, psychological make-up, cultural background, religious beliefs, etc. No two readers read the same text in the exact same way. Reader-response theorists also aim to break down boundaries between literary and popular

texts, re-examining the criteria by which we judge quality literature. Put into practice, a teacher using reader-response theory in her classroom might ask her students to think about these kinds of questions in relation to the text: how did it make you feel? Did it make you laugh? Cry? Smile? Which character(s) did you like/dislike? And why? What fears or concerns do you have for the characters? How would you change the end of the novel? What do you think is the main point or conflict of the novel?

Readers bring different life experiences to the texts they read; some identify with the characters in the book because they see their experiences mirrored there, and for others, books provide an opportunity to exercise their empathic skills, to walk around in someone else's shoes. A private secondary school in central Pennsylvania, Mercersburg Academy, assigned *The Hate U Give* as summer reading and conducted a follow-up essay contest. The winning essays were posted online and give us an opportunity to examine three different students' personal responses to the text. Some responses represent mirroring, while for others, the book served as a window. The first winning essay, for example, was written by 9th grader Gordy Simon (2017), a resident of Chicago, Illinois, or as he describes it "the north side of Chicago, the 'safe side'" (p. 1). Or so he thought, until someone was shot outside his own home. "Police blockades and sirens were all I could see, hear, and think about. Someone was shot right near my house. They were shot right next to the train I ride to the Cubs games. For the first time ever, it occurred to me that people actually die in Chicago. *The Hate U Give* helped me think about it deeper" (p. 1). He continues by comparing his experience to the experience of Starr's boyfriend, Chris, "a privileged, white kid," and acknowledges that the book helped him walk in Starr's shoes. He concludes by sharing that the book "really made me think about violence and look at my life differently. The book really upset me and unsettled me" (p. 3). A second essay winner, an 11th grade African-American

woman from Washington, DC named Patrice McGloin (2017), writes that “Starr’s struggles parallel my own with finding this balance between speaking up and keeping my head down” (p. 2). The novel, she continues, helped her find her own voice, recognizing that her silence in the face of racist comments only “breeds ignorance and hate” (p. 4). The third essay winner, a senior from Florence, FL named Mira Vance (2017), reflects on the costs of “empty activism.” Having grown up in a liberal, white, college-town where there was “a protest of some issue at any given time,” Mira argues that her town’s brand of political activism is “almost entirely empty. There is no threat, no sense of loss, we are fighting without having a clear sense of what we are fighting for” (p. 2). Starr, on the other hand, Mira recognizes, runs the risk of losing everything by speaking out. She could be attacked by King, smeared in the media, and lose her friends at school. Mira concludes by writing “I must be able to step back and create a platform for others to speak from what they know instead of yelling from a place where I know nothing” (p. 1). These are three powerful responses that reflect the life experiences, gender, race, and beliefs each reader brings to the book.

How might we expand our understanding of *The Hate U Give* by examining it from another angle? From the perspective of black literary theory? Whereas reader-response theory privileges the role of the reader above text, world, and author, black literary theory focuses much heavily on both the text and the text’s relation to the larger world. Developed in the early 1960s, largely in reaction to formalists’ insistence on a single, authoritative interpretation of a text, early black literary theorists argued that “black art was directly related to black life. It imitated it” (Moore, 1997, p. 139), and therefore, the text could only be understood in a historical and social context. Furthermore, theorists argued, readers must acknowledge blackness itself as a social construction, and understand the dual identity, the “double-consciousness,” the twoness - as

described by W.E.B. Dubois - that characterizes the black American lived experience. Indeed, prominent black literary theorist Henry Louis Gates Jr. contends that the black text itself is two-toned or double-voiced, both white and black, standard and vernacular, of the Western/American literary tradition and apart from it. As such, Gates' argues, the most important task in reading black literature is understanding the way in which blackness is signified. He defines signification as "the ability to say one thing and mean another," and claims it is "the blackest aspect of the black [literary] tradition" (as cited in Moore, 1997, p. 144).

Regardless of the life experience readers bring to *The Hate U Give*, nearly all of us would be quick to recognize the ways in which the novel imitates real life. Indeed, it is such a timely story, in many ways it blurs the line between fiction and the events of our everyday lives. Civil hearings for Michael Slager, a former South Carolina police officer, began just this week, after a mistrial was declared in his criminal murder trial a year ago; Slager shot and killed Walter Scott, a black man he pulled over for a broken tail light. Scott was running away from Slager when he was shot. In Thomas' story, Khalil, like Walter, is also pulled over for a broken tail light, and he too is shot and killed, despite being unarmed. The similarities between these fictional and real-life events are not coincidental; rather, by intentionally mirroring the specifics of real-life events, Thomas accomplishes two things. First, she makes the familiar unfamiliar. Assuming any of us could become desensitized to headlines describing senseless deaths of black men at the hands of police, Thomas reintroduces us to the tragedy and injustice of such events. Secondly, by mirroring reality through fiction, she gives us the requisite distance to examine our lives in a less threatening and polarizing way. Teachers could use the characters and events of the novel to prompt discussions about prejudice, systemic racism, poverty, segregation, and activism, both in the fictional world of Chicago, and the real one.

If *The Hate U Give* is an obvious example of art mirroring real life, it is also an illustration of the double-consciousness, the sense of two-ness, that characterizes the lived black American experience first described by W.E.B. DuBois. The story is told in the first-person from the perspective of sixteen-year-old Starr, who confesses on the very first page that “there are just some places where it’s not enough to be me. *Either version of me*” (emphasis added, p. 3). If the reader is confused by Starr’s double-ness, Thomas doesn’t leave us in suspense for long. We soon learn that Starr is plagued by “this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others” (DuBois, 1903), that she feels like one person in Garden Heights, the predominantly African-American community where she lives, and another person at Williamson, the predominantly white private high school she attends. Starr tells us that becoming Williamson Starr is like “flipping the switch in my brain” (p. 71): “Williamson Starr doesn’t use slang...Williamson Starr holds her tongue when people piss her off so nobody will think she’s the ‘angry black girl.’ Williamson Starr is approachable. No stank-eyes, side-eyes, none of that....Basically, Williamson Starr doesn’t give anyone a reason to call her ghetto” (p. 71). For the reader who has never been burdened with the need to continuously monitor herself from the perspective of another, Starr’s monologue can be revealing, but it’s only when she shares her feelings that we fully recognize the emotional toll a sense of two-ness takes. After she transforms herself into Williamson Starr, she says “I can’t stand myself for doing it, but I do it anyway” (p. 71). She also describes it as “exhausting.” As DuBois argues, the only way to heal the emotional wounds of a double consciousness is through a merging of the two selves. “In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. He would not Africanize America...he would not bleach his Negro soul.” For Starr, too, the way forward is to merge her two selves into one, without losing either. This merging is suggested metaphorically by the blending of her physical

environments – by the story’s end she lives and attends school in the same neighborhood, while still working in Garden Heights at her father’s store – but her two selves merge in other ways as well. She is finally able to be her full self with Chris, her white boyfriend, no longer self-conscious about using slang or showing attitude. And she tells her father about her relationship, which he learns to accept. Starr thinks, “my two worlds just collided. Surprisingly, everything’s all right” (p. 359).

Just as there is a double-ness to Starr’s character, there is a double-ness to the text itself as well, or as Henry Louis Gates, Jr. argues, the text is both standard and vernacular, part of the Western literary tradition and apart. Much of this twoness of language is communicated through Starr’s struggles to fit in at her white school, to avoid using slang so her friends don’t think of her as “ghetto.” But other characters speak in the vernacular too. And Thomas doesn’t want to leave the reader in a place of ambivalence. Like Starr, who by story’s end embraces both parts of herself and both ways of speaking, Thomas wants the reader to recognize black vernacular as a legitimate dialect. Whereas white authors have historically used dialect to communicate inferiority, Thomas re-appropriates the literary technique to validate and embrace language differences, something she accomplishes not only by writing as a black author, but by empowering her protagonist to raise her voice, whether speaking in Standard English or vernacular. But the double-ness of the text isn’t just about language; Thomas uses signifying techniques as well. When Starr repeatedly refers to the cop who killed Khalil by his badge number “one-fifteen”, for example, we’re supposed to recognize the ways in which this dehumanizes the cop, and mirrors the dehumanization of black boys and men by cops and the media. But we’re also meant to recognize it as a reference to the dehumanization black people suffered at the hands of white people during slavery, when they were separated from their

families, stripped of their names (indeed, many took the surnames of their owners), and deprived of their ancestral history. In another example of signification, Starr connects the dots directly for the reader. When 115 talks about the good he hoped to do in Garden Heights, Starr muses: “Funny. Slave masters thought they were making a difference in people’s lives too. Same shit, different century. I wish people like them would stop thinking that people like me need saving” (p. 246). Finally, Thomas’ signifies by placing her novel in conversation with other texts, both texts of the canon like DuBois’ *The Souls of Black Folk*, but texts that represent new kinds of literacies more recognizable to contemporary readers, like rap music, television comedies, photographs/images, and video games.

Just as black literary theory was a byproduct of the larger civil rights movement of the 1960s, feminist critical theory, too, was a byproduct of the larger women’s movement. And like black literary theory, feminist interpretations place more emphasis on the relationship between the text and the larger world, the place of the author within the canon (or apart from), and the representation of female characters (or absence of) within the text. Reader response is important too, indeed critical, but feminist theory aims to produce change in the wider culture and the individual reader rather than privilege any one person’s particular interpretation. Moore (1997) writes, “One of the objectives of feminist theory and criticism is to bring about change, to make a new world in which women speak and write with their own powerful language” (p. 117). Although feminist critical theorists are unified in their desire to empower women, there is no single unifying theoretical position; feminists write from the black feminist tradition, the Marxist feminist tradition, and the psychoanalytic feminist tradition, to name just a few. But these feminist theorists ask common questions, including but not limited to: what is the gender of the author? What is the author’s attitude about the place of women in society? Is the protagonist

male or female? Are female characters portrayed in relation to others or independently? How are female bodies portrayed in particular? Do female characters have agency? How is language used differently by male and female characters? How does a character's gender intersect with other identities?

Although the theme of race often overshadows other elements of Thomas's text, *The Hate U Give* is as much a story about female empowerment as it is a plea for the eradication of racial prejudice and injustice. Not only is the protagonist of her story a young woman, Starr Carter is an athlete and a scholar who navigates two worlds with a great deal of aplomb. When Starr and her friends are invited by the boys to play basketball with the taunt "there's always room for pretty girls. We'll try not to hurt you" (p. 108) – a taunt that not only objectifies the girls but diminishes their athletic talent – Starr and her friends respond with grit. They roll their eyes at the familiar slight and then take to the court and do battle on equal footing. As Starr describes, "No matter what's going on, when Hailey, Maya, and I play together, it's rhythm, chemistry and skill rolled into a ball of amazingness" (p. 109). Some feminist theorists might take aim at Thomas's decision to complicate the scene by introducing Starr's attraction to her boyfriend Chris. "Chris is behind me, the only thing between me and the hoop. Let's me clarify – my butt is against his crotch" (p. 110). After all, female characters are so often sexualized, Thomas could have made the choice to define Starr solely in terms of her physical strength and agility in this moment. But Thomas makes an important distinction; Starr isn't sexually *objectified*, but rather is portrayed as a sexual being, someone who has desires of her own. Indeed, she demonstrates command and control of her own body, standing firm against Chris's advances when she's not ready, initiating intimacy when she is ready. Of course, Starr's story is one of female empowerment not only because of her physical prowess or command of her

sexuality, but because she grows into her voice. After Khalil's death, as the only witness to his death, Starr is muted by the weight of the responsibility. "I always said if I saw it happen to somebody, I would have the loudest voice, making sure the world knew what went down. Now I am that person, and I'm too afraid to speak" (p. 34). Later, she dreams about Khalil and Natasha being shot and her inability to save them: "I try to warn them, but my voice doesn't work. The shadow swallows them up in an instant and now it creeps toward me" (p. 50). Her friend Kenya even calls her a coward for not speaking out. By novel's end, however, Starr goes on television to tell Khalil's story, and speaks at a protest-turned-riot too. She finally recognizes that "that's the problem. We let people say stuff, and they say it so much that it becomes ok to them and normal for us. What's the point of having a voice if you're gonna be silent in those moments you shouldn't be?" (p. 252). For many feminist critical theorists, power is achieved primarily through language; Starr's journey provides a believable illustration of the courage needed to find one's voice.

Although Starr finds her voice, Thomas's novel doesn't provide any easy answers. Khalil's killer is never brought to justice, and Garden Heights is traumatized by rioting at story's end. What it does provide, however, is hope - hope of the same stripe and color Johnson et al. (2017) argue is necessary for transforming classrooms into sites of racial justice. Starr doesn't just find her voice, she learns how to use words as weapons. She learns that talking is doing - "it's more productive than silence" (p. 410) - and when she responds to the interviewer about Khalil's death, she *fights*. "[The cop's] assumption killed Khalil. It could have killed me," she explains, while silently thinking her retort is "a kick straight to the ribs" (p. 290). And when asked what she would like to say to the police officer, she "[throws] one more blow right at one-fifteen" and says, "I'd ask him if he wished he shot me too" (p. 290). If violence against black

youth does indeed start in the classroom, as Johnson et al. (2017) argue, because of the metaphorical bullets educators shoot (e.g. rejecting, silencing, disrespecting black lives), then bringing the black experience to the classroom through texts like *The Hate U Give* - that is, using words as weapons – should offer an antidote to some of the ills that continue to plague our society. And providing students the tools to analyze texts via literary theory can only give them extra ammunition.

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